

Points of View

'Harvest of Shame' Again?

The president's guest worker proposal reminds us of the once-notorious bracero program.

By John Conyers Jr. and Sheila Jackson Lee

Forgive us if we are skeptical of the Bush administration's election-year conversion to immigration reform. President George W. Bush's proposal would, in truth, relegate millions of foreigners to permanent underclass status. The initiative is being offered by a president who for three years has either ignored immigration policy or weighed in only to deny legal protections to newcomers. We hope that the immigrant community sees this political ploy for what it is—a wolf in sheep's clothing offered by a party that has consistently opposed immigrants' rights.

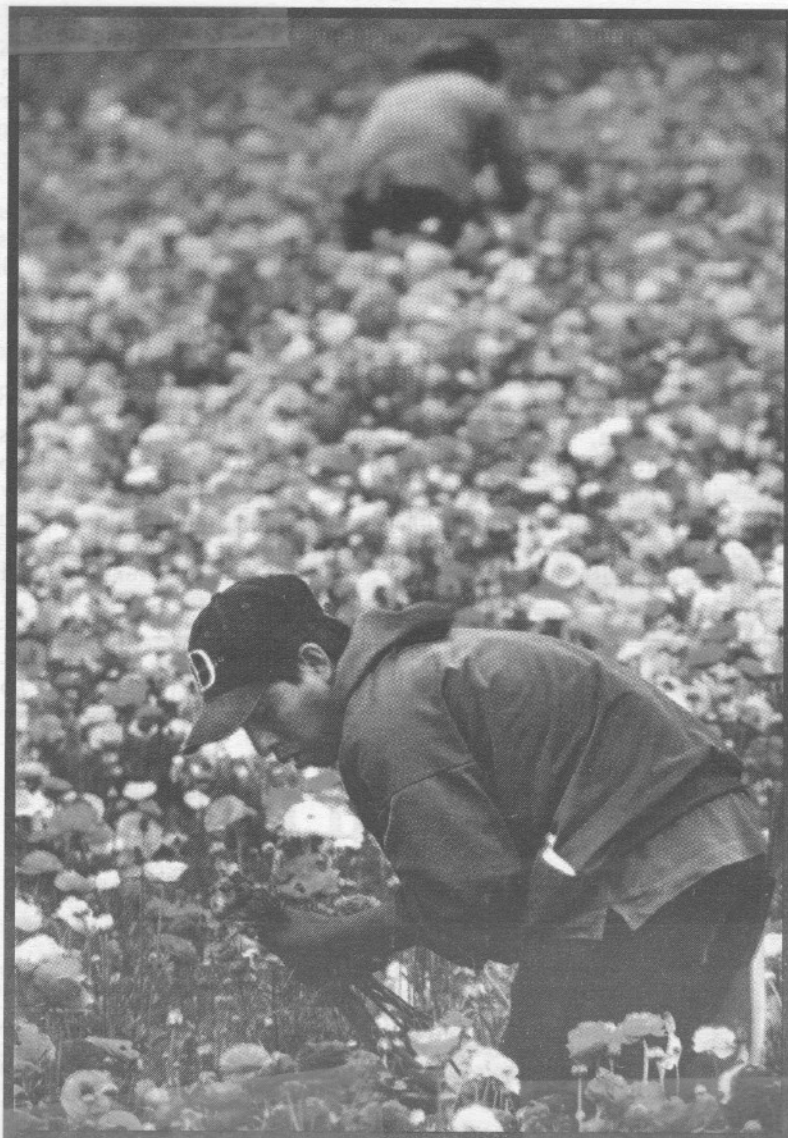
Let's start with the administration's proposal itself. In a single stroke, Bush would take the millions of undocumented aliens in the United States and make them—as well as other foreigners living abroad—eligible for a massive new guest worker program. Many see in this initiative nothing more than a 21st century version of the bracero program.

Between 1942 and 1964, as many as 400,000 temporary foreign agricultural workers a year were legally employed in the United States by virtue of this now-notorious exchange with Mexico. They came as seasonal workers to plant and harvest crops. Many were housed in dilapidated shacks; they were paid poorly and sometimes not at all. If they spoke up for their rights, they were dismissed and shipped home. The program ended in 1964 in scandal after Edward R. Murrow's landmark television documentary, "Harvest of Shame," exposed its many abuses.

Under Bush's program, immigrants' right to stay in the United States would again be entirely contingent on getting and keeping a job with a U.S. employer. What is the guarantee that the abuses and exploitation of the past will not be repeated?

WHERE THINGS WILL GO WRONG

The flaws in Bush's immigration blueprint are many. The Department of Homeland Security already has a backlog of more than six million individuals waiting for their visa applications to be processed. Piling on millions of additional temporary worker applications without identifying any additional resources to screen or process them is an invitation to chaos. And President Bush has not said where the money will come from.



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Also unanswered is why foreigners desperate enough to leave their homes to work illegally in the United States—the precise group being targeted by the administration—would choose to come forward to declare themselves under the new program. Essentially, they would be putting themselves, and their families, on a list to be deported as soon as their temporary visas expired.

Another unresolved issue is how the proposal would interact with a harsh 1996 law specifying that anyone who has been unlawfully present in the United States for more than one year is barred from re-entry for up to 10 years.

For an alternate point of view, read Stuart Taylor Jr.'s Jan. 19 column, "They're Coming to America" (Page 46).

millions of American workers would be exposed to unfair competition from exploited foreign workers.

A POOR TRACK RECORD

Immigrants should take note of the fact that this new program is being offered by the most anti-immigrant administration since the time of the infamous Palmer Raids, a series of mass arrests targeting foreigners with unpopular views after World War I. Since Sept. 11, the Bush administration has engaged in a policy of institutional profiling based on immigrants' country of origin and religious beliefs.

Lest we forget, after the Twin Towers fell, this administration responded by locking up thousands of immigrants without charges and with no access to attorneys, let alone any due process rights. It has since sought to cover its tracks by refusing to provide a cursory list of the immigrants' names and by ordering deportation hearings to be held in secret. This administration also drafted the tragically misnamed USA Patriot Act, which granted the attorney general the unilateral and indefinite power to detain immigrants on nothing but a personal whim.

The administration's track record on refugees is no better. The State Department has drastically cut annual refugee admissions from 100,000 in the Bill Clinton years to less than 30,000—the lowest point in the history of the refugee program. Officials have done so at a time when we face unprecedented resettlement needs, with more than 35 million refugees worldwide.

The risks for American workers facing a massive influx of new competition are equally significant. We already have a temporary worker program, which includes several safeguards to protect Americans: Employers must attest that U.S. workers will not be harmed or displaced, that foreign workers will receive the same wages and benefits as U.S. workers do, and that foreign workers are not being used to replace striking U.S. workers. Under the new program, employers would apparently be free to ignore these common-sense requirements. The inevitable result:

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Finally, the record of the Congress to which President Bush has given the responsibility of drafting the details of his guest worker proposal should give all immigrants cause for concern. When the Republicans took over Congress in 1994, they wasted little time in using their new power to deny legal immigrants access to food stamps and other public benefits; to cut back on due process safeguards for victims of persecution seeking asylum; to permit deportation for minor acts that were not a cause for deportation when originally committed; to make it harder for immigrants to be reunited with their family members; and to end the ability of immigrants to readjust their status from within the United States.

Even more ominous are the proposals that the Republicans have pushed, but failed to enact only as a result of the threat of Democratic filibuster or presidential veto. These include efforts to deny immigrant children the right to a public education; to ban bilingual ballots; to slash the annual cap on legal immigration and to impose a harsh new cap on refugees; and to amend the Constitution to deny the birthright of citizenship.

HOPE FOR 'HUDDLED MASSES'

While Republicans have been busying themselves making our nation unwelcoming to new immigrants, Democrats have been advocating real and meaningful reform.

We favor earned access to legalization for those who have overstayed a visa or entered illegally. This is *not* a blank check for anybody. It is a program through which longtime, hard-working residents of good moral character with demonstrated community ties could seek green cards.

Democrats also support a temporary worker program for agricultural and service workers, but only one that includes a mechanism for achieving permanent legal status and citizenship and that provides effective wage and employment protections. We also favor increasing family-based visas to begin to eliminate the cruel backlogs that now deny hope to millions of immigrant families. Part and parcel of these reforms would be efforts to strengthen safety and security at our borders, including ensuring that we have the necessary resources to enforce our laws.

Clearly, this nation needs immigration reform. But it must be the right reform. Since 1903, the Statue of Liberty has welcomed immigrants with the words, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." More than 100 years later, we need a law that reinvigorates this welcome, not one that creates a second-class form of citizenship.